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THE USE OF MONSTERS IN *BEOWULF*

Grado en Estudios Ingleses

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Abstract

By paying attention to the role of monsters in the poem *Beowulf*, this research will try to focus its attention on a theme which has been considered of great importance in the last decades. The thematic field of monsters in relation to recent theories regarding the concept of otherness has been hailed as a very important one for the study of literature and culture. In *The Use of Monsters in Beowulf,* I will be dealing with some of the figures of monsters in the poem, namely, Grendel, Grendel's Mother and the Dragon, which so evidently differ from the qualities of the hero, thus enhancing his figure. They evidently show some characteristics that differ from those of the hero and therefore acquire not only a thematic but also a structural and narrative role in the poem. To carry out this investigation I shall analyse the origin, meaning and use of monsters in the Middle Ages. I will be paying attention to the sources early medieval authors might have had at hand when dealing with monsters, these sources being those regarding the monstrous races in Christian religion, mainly springing from the Genesis book in the *Bible*, as well as on the echoes of Greek or Norse mythologies, *Beowulf* being a text comprising references from previous accounts which derive from pagan beliefs and practices. Apart from these biblical and mythological accounts, I shall be commenting on the scientific tradition early medieval authors received from sources such as those by Aristotle and Pliny, as well as from early Christian authors.

After taking into consideration these historical sources, I shall also be presenting some contemporary standpoints in *teratology*, mainly those synthesized by Jeffrey Cohen. His theses explain in general terms how to understand monsters and our relationship to them, giving special attention not so much to physical descriptions as to the meaning and symbology of these creatures which in the early taxonomical descriptions offered by Aristotle or Pliny were simply a series of marvels of the East. After this second chapter, I will be dealing with the poem itself, offering basic information about its location, composition date and authorship, as well as providing a summary. Once this methodological approach properly explained, and the poem introduced, I will be focusing on the text itself, paying attention to each of the fragments where the traits and behaviours of monsters might be relevant to the understanding of the poem, thus coming to a conclusion that might prove the thesis that these creatures are really, along with the hero, part and parcel of the essence of the epic poem.

Key words: monsters, *Beowulf*, sources

1 Introduction

In ancient times, Greek and Roman authors trying to discern, classify and describe the diverse disciplines in the study of nature, focused on a particular group of creatures that inhabited the lands of the east. These authors' contribution to a diversity of texts throughout history cannot be denied, and they turned especially influential for the study of the origins of the different cultures, which leaned on this "estrangement" approach. Thus, the monster theoretical approach slowly arose as a consequence of the interest and the need to justify the physical or behavioural differences which challenged the Western cultural identity. Today, monster theory has become an independent discipline which also tries to account for the modern and contemporary fascination by monsters that certain genres and artistic and cultural expressions share.

In my particular field of research, apart from using some of the theories by Jeffrey Cohen, I will be focusing mainly on the aspect of the specific sources early medieval Christian authors might have used. In so doing, I will be dealing with all sorts of aspects concerning these sources, such as the duality between pagan and Christian, written and oral sources or the dealing of the traditions by scops at that time.

As for the corpus I will be using *Beowulf*, both in its Old English original as well as in the translation by Seamus Heaney. Undeniably, *Beowulf* is the key text in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, and therefore, much has already been done on the aspect of the monsters. Approaches to this topic have endowed us with a large quantity of bibliographical material, but the specific focus on monsters according to recent theories might add some new light to this field.

My approach will start by taking into account the diversity of sources from the critical standpoint of monster theory, thus paying attention to a set of qualities in the monstrous figures we encounter in the poem. I will be defending the thesis that the size of the hero and the epic dimension of the poem at large depend of the addition of monstrous qualities as the different fights in the poem progress. Thus, it is most necessary to analyse which of these qualities are in order to understand as well the development and outcome of the story.

The poem has been previously dealt with as part of the materials studied in three of the courses on the Degree of English Studies at the University of La Laguna, these courses being *Iconos culturales y literarios de Inglaterra, Arquetipos literarios medievales ingleses* and *Inglés medieval*. In following them, I became acquainted with the commentary and analysis

techniques which medieval texts entailed; I am aware of the difficulties involved in dealing with manuscript texts, as well as with that of using sources which respond to a different cultural milieu. Although historical distance seems almost impossible to overcome, it is precisely the way this distance is re-enacted in present-day texts that seems really interesting: thus, when I started this degree, I had only known *Beowulf* as a film, which I took to be a contemporary original 2007 production. Given the fact that I do enjoy science fiction literature and I consider *Beowulf* to have such a potential, I wanted to delve into the origins of this long lasting monstrous essence in the poem, which keeps on attracting audiences and readers. Thus, I believe I might aim to better understand the poem in the past as well as in the present, since monster theory tries to account for the existence of such a paradigm.

2 Monsters: Sources and theories

2.1 Trying to define the Monster, an unachievable goal

According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, *monster* comes from Old French *monstre*, which was taken from the Latin word *monstrum*, meaning "monster, something marvellous; originally a divine portent or warning". *Monster* is thus ultimately related to the Latin verb *monstrare,* which means "to show"[1]. The manifold nature of the monster can be guessed simply by looking at the entries for this word. In *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1036-7) *monster* can be:

> "something extraordinary or unnatural; a prodigy, a marvel"; "an animal or plant deviating in one or more of its parts from the normal type; spec., an animal afflicted with some congenital malformation; a misshapen birth, an abortion"; "an imaginary animal (such as the centaur, sphinx, minotaur, or the heraldic Griffin, wyvern, etc.) having a form either partly brute and partly human, or compounded of elements from two or more animal forms"; "a person of inhuman and horrible cruelty or wickedness"; "an animal of huge size; hence, anything of vast and unwieldy proportions". Apart from the definitions of the subject itself, it also provides a definition of the use of *monster* as an adjective with the meaning "of extraordinary size or extent; gigantic, huge, monstrous".

Monsters have been present in all cultures and times, and their origin in each of them is different from that in others. In order to prove this, I shall presently be referring to the instance of giants as an example of the diversity found simply in the Western culture. The richness of the material and quantity of monsters is such that any larger approach to this body of creatures would turn out to be endless.

In Jewish and Christian religions we can see the existence of giants since the primeval time of Adam and Eve. According to Genesis 4 and 6, Cain and Abel were the first-born children, the former working the field while the latter kept cattle. According to the myth, when coming to give offerings to God, Abel gave meat from a first-born from his cattle and Cain gave products from his field. God was only pleased with meat offering, which made Cain angry: he asked his brother to go to the fields, where he killed Abel. His divine punishment was to be condemned to wander restless and to get nothing from the fields he harvested. God also put a mark on Abel which protected him from whoever wanted to kill him. Thus, Cain left the place and lived in the land of Nod, to the east of Eden. There he formed his family and had descendants. When angels descended to Nod and copulated with

[1] See Harper, Douglas. "Monster." *Online Etymology Dictionary*. 2001-2015. Web. 10 June 2015.

the women there, the result of the angelic-human union turned out to be the Nephilim or giants; these would disappear later with the Flood[2]. In Numbers 13, we can see that in spite of the Flood, the giants were found again in Canaan, when Moses sent thirteen men to explore this land[3].

In Greek mythology we can see that monsters were originated in a very different way. According to Greek mythology, Gaea (the Earth) gave birth to Uranus (the Sky) and together they conceived three Cyclopes, three Hecatoncheires and twelve Titans. Uranus hated the three Hecatoncheires; Briareus, Cottus and Gyges. Because of this, Uranus decided to keep the Hecatoncheires into Gaea's womb. Gaea became furious and plotted with Cronus against Uranus; she gave Cronus a sickle and when Uranus tried to copulate with Gaea, Cronus emasculated his father. When the blood emerging from the emasculated member touched the earth, the Giants, the Ash Tree Nymphs and the Erinnyes appeared[4].

As for Norse mythology, in these accounts there was a giant called Surt who lived in a place called Muspelheim, the land of fire, at the south of a great void known as Ginnungagap. In this great void the air from Muspelheim and the air from Niflheim met and created a frost giant called Ymir, who begot two children while he was sleeping via arms sweat, and another one via the friction of his legs. These were breastfed by Audhumla, a giant cow. These frost giants were considered the first family of Jotuns, which is another way to refer to frost giants[5].

2.2 The sources of medieval monsters

When coming to consider the interest on the marvelous in the Middle Ages, we can trace it mainly as part of the classical world legacy. By this we mean that, along with mythological accounts, in ancient Greek and Roman cultures there was an explicit interest in this field, and thus, teratology -the study of animal or vegetal abnormalities or deformities- emerged as a branch of science, as geographical discoveries allowed for a new cartography and the location of new peoples and creatures in these new lands, normally associated to the east. According to John Friedman[6], the first accounts of monstrous races were produced by Greek authors. The first one who talked about these marvels of the East, which was considered as a mysterious and marvellous region, was Herodotus and after him, Ctesias (fifth century b.C.) and

[2] See "Genesis 4." and "Genesis 6." *Bible Gateway*. New International Version. n.d. Web. 3 June 2015.
[3] "Numbers 13." *Ibidem*, New International Version. n.d. Web. 3 June 2015.
[4] "The Creation." *Greek Mythology,* 2015. Web. 3 June 2015.
[5] "The Creation." *Norse Mythology,* 2011-2015. Web. 3 June 2015.
[6] *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse U. P, 2000. Print.

Megasthenes (fourth century b.C.). In his book *Indika*, Ctesias wrote about his impressions of the East, just as Megasthenes did too, when travelling to India and writing about its curiosities, inhabitants and its social and religious practices. After Ctesias and Megasthenes, Alexander the Great was the most important traveler to India, where he reported to Aristotle the marvelous things he found in his expeditions; information which was later used by Aristotle for the creation of his *De Animalibus.*

Ctesias' and Megasthenes' works became known by Latin readers thanks to Pliny the Elder and his thirty-six books encyclopedia known as *Natural History.* His work is a collection of short pieces of information about plants, animals, fish, ancient art, architecture, eating customs, manufacturing etc. since he considered "that everything made by nature was intended to have purposes, which the natural scientist tries to find in the most ordinary things as well as in wonders" (Friedman, 8). Based on the works of Ctesias and Megasthenes, Pliny elaborated this encyclopedia, to which he added more races that he found deeply interesting; they were races of men and women such as *Giants* or large men; *Amazons* or warlike women; *Blemmyae*, men with their faces on their chest; *Cyclopes* or men with one rounded eye; *Ethiopians* or black men living on mountains; *Horned Men*; *Panotii*, which were characterized by their large ears; *Pygmies* or small men, often related to Dwarfs; and *Troglodytes*, who were entities who lived in caves. These are just a couple of examples of a much extended list of monstrous races compiled by Pliny form the works of Ctesias, Megasthenes and Alexander among others, together with his own contributions.

We can also find authors who worked in the field of monsters in the Christian tradition. These were Saint Augustine in the fourth century and Isidore of Seville in the seventh century. St. Augustine thought that these earlier sources of marvels of the East could not be incorporated to Christianity without the authority of the *Bible*, thus suggesting in his *De civitate Dei* a relationship between the monstrous races and the earliest human being. About this relationship, Wittkower (49) summarizes Saint Augustine's arguments:

> The stories about fabulous races may not be true -that would be the simplest way out. If, however, these races do exist, they may not be human; certainly some authors would describe monkeys and sphinxes as races of men and be even proud of their ingenuity if we did not happen to know that they are animals. If, on the other hand, these races exist and are really human, then they must be descended from Adam. Just as there exist monstrous births in individual races, so in the whole race there may exist monstrous races. As no one will deny that the individual monstrosities are all descended from that one man so all the monsters trace their pedigree to that first father of all. Man has no right to make a judgement about these races. For God, the creator of all, knows where and when each thing ought to be or to have been created, because he sees the similarities and diversities which can contribute to the beauty of the whole.

Both, Isidore and Augustine coincide in the fact that if it is true that these monstrous races exist, then they are a part of the creation of God and must not be understood as failures in His creation. Thus, what we find in Augustine's *De civitate Dei* (Book XXI, chapter eight) is later on recorded almost with the same word by Isidore's *Etymologiae* (Book XI. 3)[7]:

> Varro defines portents as beings that seem to have been born contrary to nature – but they are not contrary to nature, because they are created by divine will, since the nature of everything is the will of the Creator. Whence even the pagans address God sometimes as 'Nature' (*Natura*), sometimes as 'God.' 2. A portent is therefore not created contrary to nature, but contrary to what is known nature. Portents are also called signs, omens, and prodigies, because they are seen to portend and display, indicate and predict future events. 3. The term 'portent' (*portentum*) is said to be derived from foreshadowing (*portendere*), that is, from 'showing beforehand' (*praeostendere*). 'Signs' (*ostentum*), because they seem to show (*ostendere*) a future event. Prodigies (*prodigium*) are so called, because they 'speak hereafter' (*porro dicere*), that is, they predict the future.

According to Williams, Isidore of Seville's work, inspired in an etymological perspective, consisted on the classification of monsters according to their differences with the human body or its organs because "our bodies provide, not only a model, but an original and continuing symbol of the order itself" (108). According to this, Isidore classifies monsters according to the following criteria:

> (1) hypertrophy of the body, (2) atrophy of the body, (3) excrescence of bodily parts, (4) superfluity of bodily parts, (5) deprivation of parts, (6) mixture of human and animal parts, (7) animal births by human women, (8) mislocation of organs or parts in the body, (9) disturbed growth (being born old), (10) composite beings, (11) hermaphrodites, (12) monstrous races.

Hitherto, we have seen the arduous work of these naturalists who not only produced a physical description of these marvels of the East, but as well a reliable explanation for their existence or their purpose on the world. However, their descriptions did not account for the fascination these creatures exerted then, just as they currently do.

[7] "Portenta esse Varro ait quae contra naturam nata videntur: sed non sunt contra naturam, quia divina voluntate fiunt, cum voluntas Creatoris cuiusque conditae rei natura sit. Unde et ipsi gentiles Deum mode Naturam, modo Deum appellant. Portentum ergo fit non contra naturam, sed contra quam est nota natura. Portenta autem et ostenta, monstra atque prodigia ideo nuncupantur, quod portendere atque ostendere, monstrare ac praedicare aliqua futura videntur." Edition and English translation by Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, A. Beach and Oliver Berghof, p. 243.

2.3 Methodological approach

Among the authors who have tried to tackle this issue, I think that Cohen's theories best summarize all the possible ways we have understood and dealt with the monstrous. Therefore, I shall be following the structure of "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)", where he proposes seven postulates as an attempt to explain this relationship:

Thesis I: Monsters' bodies are a vehicle that bears a cultural moment. Apart from their diverse physical abnormalities, monsters are the medium that bears not only fear, anxiety, fantasy and desire, but also a significant representation of the time in which they were born.

Thesis II: Monsters always escape; these entities cannot be truly destroyed, they always manage to return, there is always something left that represents the presence of monsters, either physical or emotional.

Thesis III: Monsters refuse categorization; being creatures that can be half animal or half human, monsters are difficult to classify because it is difficult to decide to which category the monster belong to. This is why our necessity of knowledge is threatened by an entity that refuses to be classified and that is why monsters are dangerous.

Thesis IV: Not only monsters differ from human beings in physical appearance but they are also different from us culturally, politically, racially, economically or sexually. These differences make monsters be entities far from as, considered as *other*, alien to us. Any cultural difference which departs from what is take to be normal is considered monstrous, either because the culture considered as *other* is an ancient one or because there is little knowledge about it. We also tend to transform political or ideological differences into monstrous aspects, entities or places. Differences in gender roles is another reason to consider as monstrous, since anything that behaves in a different way from what is expected is different, thus, a monster. The same happens with racial differences; skin colour is another reason of monstering.

Thesis V: "The monster polices the borders of the possible". They are at the borders of the possible to remind us not to cross that border since we can be punished. Monsters are vehicles of prohibition that do not follow our rules, so they have their own practices that enforce the laws of exogamy in order to warn against practices such as incest, interracial relationships, homosexuality, etc. All these practices are considered immoral, and thus taboo, and monstrous actions.

Thesis VI: Nevertheless, monster's entailment to prohibition makes us feel fascination at the same time that we are afraid of them. Monsters can do many things that we are not able to

do because our society imposes upon us certain rules that have to be accepted. Thus, we see monsters as an *alter ego*, as an *other* self with which we fantasize breaking those rules and actions that are forbidden to us.

Thesis VII: Finally, we can push monsters far away from us but they always come back to make us "re-evaluate cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression". They come back to make us think why we have marginalized them and why have we created them.

I will be reading Beowulf from the perspective of these theses, analyzing the description of the monsters and their actions as a means to explain why they may have been so engaging for the early medieval Anglo-Saxon audiences.

3 The poem

3.1 Introduction

Before starting the analysis of the use of monsters in *Beowulf*, it is fundamental to introduce the poem itself.

Beowulf is a long poem belonging to the epic genre and it is made up of more than 3.000 lines originally written in Old English, the language brought by Anglo-Saxon settlers to Great Britain before the Norman Conquest. It is believed that the poem was passed down orally for a long time and then, at a certain point of its composition, it was written on vellum in a period of time that remains unknown, since we cannot tell for sure how many instances of the poem may have been written down before coming to the one we find in the only surviving manuscript, *Cotton Vitellius A xv,* which has been dated to the late 10th century -four centuries after the first apparition of the first written Old English works- and was put to handwriting by two Anglo-Saxon scribes working in collaboration[8]. The manuscript, under the name of Nowell Codex, is included in the volume *Cotton Vitellius A.xv*, which, in turn, is one of the four major Anglo-Saxon codices.

The manuscript contains three other medieval prose works: "The Passion of Saint Christopher", the "Marvels of the East", the "Letter of Alexander to Aristotle", as well as the poem "Judith". The single copy of *Beowulf* survived a fire that destroyed a few manuscripts and damaged many others in Little Deans Yard at Westminster in the 18th century. But, it underwent more weathering as time passed and it is nowadays preserved at the British Library[9].

Only in 1815 do we find the *editio princeps* of the poem, carried out by Danish scholar Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin after two prior full transcripts of the manuscript by Thorkelin himself. He thought that the poem derived from a funerary chant in praise of a real Scandinavian hero, thus imagining the poet and narrator as a witness of the farewell ceremony. Most of early 19th and 20th century scholars followed this historicist interpretation of the poem, by paying attention to the huge amount of data it provided about the early migration period and the inner strives among these Germanic northern tribes. Aspects such as

[8] This statement can be found in *A Critical Companion to Beowulf* (p. 19-20), were Orchard explains that the two scribes can be differentiated thanks to the different handwritings. Scribe A wrote lines 1-1939 and scribe B wrote lines 1939-3182.

[9] Although the information provided here is generally known, I have completed it with key information from Wrenn's *Beowulf*.

the kinship system, the *comitatus* code, the Germanic legal practices, the courtly ceremonial habits or the very battles mentioned in the poem turned it into an invaluable source of information for any medievalist. Thus, during these early stages of scholarship regarding the poem, monsters as a theme seem to have kept a low profile in comparison to the importance granted to the historical background. Notwithstanding this, among those voices who claimed for the historical reading of the text, some other scholars kept on defending its literary stylistic component, and its thematic uniqueness. In 1936, J. R. R. Tolkien published his conference on "Beowulf: The monsters and the critics", where he defended the literary worth of the poem by leaning on the essential role of monsters: it was these creatures rather than real human contenders who gave the hero its real size and the poem its grandness and sombre tone. In spite of the quality of this contribution, monsters were still kept at bay, this mostly due to the 1939 discovery of the funerary remains at the archaeological site of Sutton Hoo: the historical dimension of the poem would be rediscovered once more, to get connected to the items and habits uncovered by the Anglo-Saxon funerary mound [10]. Still, monsters would eventually reach their due place in the scholarly debate.

3.2 Structure and summary

By deciding on the structure of the poem, scholars have tried to give their own interpretation of the creation and composition process, that being the reason for the diversity of options[11]. For example, some critics tend to divide the poem into two parts that respond to the development of the hero figure and his fights in youth and old age. One of these critics was J. R. R. Tolkien (28), who in *The Monsters, and the Critics and Other Essays* explained that:

> In its simplest terms it is a contrasted description of two moments in a great life, rising and setting; an elaboration of the ancient and intensely moving contrast between youth and age, first achievement and final death . It is divided in consequence into two opposed portions, different in matter, manner, and length: A from 1 to 2199 (including an exordium of 52 lines); B from 2200 to 3182 (the end).

[10] As Roberta Frank (47) suggests, there was a clear interest in historians in linking the poem's references to the real trove found at the Anglian burial mound; however, this interest, which depended mainly on the funerary character of the ship, could only be maintained as long as the composition date of the poem coincided with the burial of the ceremonial ship. As the composition date started to be moved forward, the resemblance between them started to fade. Eventually, the craft of singing in its association to funerary ceremonies has been the strongest tie remaining, as Creed's work proves.

[11] In "Structure and Unity", Shippey summarizes them by referring to a bipartite (Tolkien's and Klaeber's structure) against a tripartite one (Sisam's structure), which would be arithmetically structured and deeply affected by folktale; to this a third model, that of interlace pattern also found in art has been proposed by John Leyerle.

In other words, Tolkien's bipartite structure is formed by Beowulf's fight against Grendel when he is still young, on the hand and, on the other hand, Beowulf's fight against the Dragon, when he is an old warrior. Other critics such as Kenneth Sisam divided the poem into three parts. In *The Structure of Beowulf*, Sisam (24) says about Tolkien's division:

> To put my argument shortly- if the two parts of the poem are to be solidly bound together by the opposition of youth and age, it is not enough that the hero should be young in the one part and old in the other. The change in his age must be shown to change his ability to fight monsters, since these fights make the main plot. Instead, Beowulf is represented from beginning to end as the scourge of monsters, always seeking them out and destroying them by the shortest way.

So, as the monsters play a chief role in the poem, Sisam divides it into three parts taking into account the battles against the three monsters that Beowulf faced. Since this paper will be focused on the three main monsters, I'll stick to Sisam's tripartite division when summarizing the poem. I will be quoting from Seamus Heaney's translation of *Beowulf*, which I think reflects most accurately some of the key issues:

The first part of the poem runs from lines 1 to 1250; it is there where the battle between Beowulf and Grendel takes place. The poem starts with the voice of the narrator telling events from the past times. The first lines are devoted to the introduction the ancestor of the Danish tribe of the Scyldings, Scyld Scefing, who in spite of having been abandoned as a child, managed to raise his empire. Peoples in the neighbouring coasts paid him tribute and when he died he was buried according to the Germanic ceremonies.

The narration continues with the reference to Shield's descendant, Beow, who had four children, one of them being Hrothgar, the king of the present Danish people. After this introduction, the narration focuses on this particular reign. Hrothgar, as wealthy and powerful king, orders the construction of a mead-hall which is later called Heorot. There, he shares the wealth of war with his warriors and celebrates the victories of war. These celebrations disturb a giant monster called Grendel, who is annoyed with the loud and exaggerated celebrations of the humans at Heorot. When night falls, Grendel comes from the darkness of his swamp to Heorot, takes thirty men as a trophy and returns to his lair at the swamp. Grendel's attacks go on for twelve years. The mead-hall and its dwellers are devastated. The news about the misfortunes of the Danish king is extended in form of bard songs, which reach the home of Beowulf, a warrior from the southern Sweden tribe of the Geats. Being as strong as thirty men, Beowulf decides to help Hrothgar and sets off to Heorot followed by his retinue.

A day after their departure, Beowulf and fourteen of his bravest warriors arrive in the Danish coast. A watchman sees them and rides towards them. The leader, Beowulf, explains to the watchman who they are and their aims. After this, the watchman leads them to the mead-hall, where they are received by Wulfgar, the king's herald, who asks Beowulf about his aims. Once accepted, the visitors come into Heorot. Beowulf tells the king he has battled against five sea giant monsters and that he will kill Grendel without weapons, as the monster fights with his own hands.

Hrothgar and Wealhtheow, his wife, are pleased with Beowulf's help but the retainer Unferth, who does not tolerate another man being more important than he is, starts a discussion about the authenticity of Beowulf's swim race with Breca. Unferth's version of the swim race ends with Beowulf as a looser, but Beowulf's version ends up with him killing nine sea monsters, the reason why he lost the race. After this, Beowulf mocks Unferth because he knew that he had killed his own brothers. After the mockery, Hrothgar leaves Beowulf in the mead-hall, hoping to find the Geat still alive the morning after. Beowulf gets ready for battle and his men fall asleep. When the night comes, Grendel bursts into Heorot. All the warriors but Beowulf are asleep. The monster takes one warrior and eats him and, when he is about to take Beowulf's body too, the Geat grabs the monster's hand, breaking his fingers. Here their battle stars. The monster pulls away from the hero to save his hand, but Beowulf is stronger, and the monster learns that he has made a mistake; he is afraid of that human but unnatural strength. Terrified, Grendel keeps pulling till his arm comes out from his body, tendons and blood emerging from the dismembered body. The monster escapes deadly wounded and his arm is hung in Heorot's ceiling.

With the sunrise the Danish people come to Heorot and see the evidence of their liberation. When Hrothgar himself sees Beowulf still alive and the monster's arm hung at the hall, he shows his gratitude. Beowulf tells the king how he killed the monster and he receives a lot of presents from the king and his wife. After the celebration of Grendel's death, people stay in Heorot and sleep there, unaware of the new danger that is about to fall upon them. In this part there is a reference to Sigmund, son of Wels, a continental hero who had fought against giants and a dragon he slays with a sword.

In the second part of the poem, we find the battle between Beowulf and Grendel's mother. It goes from lines 1251 to 2199. It starts with the people at Heorot going to sleep after Grendel's death celebration. Grendel's mother is "grief-racked and ravenous, desperate for revenge". She comes to Heorot and takes with her one of Hrothgar's greatest warriors, Aechere. Before leaving the place, she picks up Grendel's arm and leaves the place hastily.

Hrothgar, very mournful by his warrior's fate, asks Beowulf for help and the hero accepts and, after being told where the monster lives, they all set off to the monster's lair.

On their way to the monster's lair they see Aechere's head at the foot of a cliff and there, they see blood-red waters full of serpents and aquatic monsters. There, Beowulf kills one of those serpents with an arrow. After preparing himself for battle, Beowulf asks the king to give his gifts to his uncle Hygelac, and to take his warriors as his. Without the king's response, the hero dives in the water and starts looking for the monster after slaying some of the serpents and other aquatic monsters trying to attack him. Once he stops swimming he find himself in the monsters dwelling, which the narrator presents as being lit by some kind of fire or light, and instantly the here is attacked by the she-monster. His coat of mail protects him from Grendel's mother's claws when she sees him. Beowulf fails to hurt her with a sword that Unferth gave him as a gift, so he throws it and takes a magic sword he finds as he fights. He kills the monster, who falls lifeless to the ground. Then, he sees Grendel's dead body and beheads him. After taking his head as a trophy, Beowulf comes back to the surface, killing all the aquatic monsters that tried to eat him. He comes back to Heorot and receives gifts and then returns to his land and king, his uncle Hygelac, back in southern Sweden. This part finishes with the hero coming back to his Hygelac's hall, where they talk about the deeds of the hero and they exchange gifts.

The last part of the poem is focused on the last days of the hero. It goes from lines 2200 to 3812. It starts with Beowulf, who has become a king after his uncle's death. He rules as a wise and prudent old monarch till one day a dragon threatens his kingdom. This dragon is the last monster that Beowulf has to battle against and it is angry: it wants to take revenge because a run-away slave had stolen one piece of his sacred hoard. So, when the night comes, the monster attacks with his fire, destroying and burning everything his flames touch.

Beowulf, as a good king who wants to save his people and kingdom, immediately prepares himself for his next and last battle. After a dark section where he remembers his youth and broods on the ongoing wars among the Swedish tribes after his uncle Hygelac's death, we see him go with eleven warriors and the slave who had stolen the goblet from the dragon's hoard to the lair of the monster. Once there, he enters the cave alone and duels against the dragon.

The rest of the warriors are too scared to fight but Wiglaf is the only one that is brave enough to help his king. Wiglaf comes into the cave and helps Beowulf to kill the dragon but it manages to bite Beowulf's neck. Wiglaf then stabs it with his sword and the fire flowing from the wound burns his arm; at the same time, Beowulf gives the last stab that kills the

dragon. Beowulf's wound is fatal, he knows he is about to die and asks Wiglaf to show him the dragon's hoard. After seeing part of the hoard, the hero praises the warrior and gives him instructions for his funeral; then, he dies. The poem finishes with the dragon being thrown into the sea and with Beowulf's burial, followed by the song of those who want to remember him as the best of leaders.

4 Monsters in the poem

As previously mentioned, in *Beowulf* we see the hero involved in a series of fights against monsters, namely Grendel, Grendel's mother and a Dragon. But these fights are not just a repetition of great deeds in which the hero finds it easy to kill his enemy; instead, the fights become harder to overcome because the monsters reveal themselves as more and more powerful and morally legitimated to struggle. In the following paragraphs I shall be introducing and referring to each of them in the same order as that they occupy in the poem in order to preserve this sense of difficulty in the art of battle.

4.1 Grendel

> Then a powerful demon, a prowler through the dark,
> Nursed a hard grievance. (86-7)[12]
> Grendel was the name of this grim demon
> Haunting the marches, marauding round the heath
> And the desolate fens; he had dwelt for a time
> In misery among the banished monsters,
> Cain's clan, whom the creator had outlawed
> And condemned as outcasts. For the killing of Abel
> The Eternal Lord had exacted a price:
> Cain got no good from committing that murder
> Because the Almighty made him anathema
> And out of the curse of his exile there sprang
> Ogres and elves and evil phantoms (102-14)[13]
> He grabbed and mauled a man on his bench,
> Bit into his bone-lappings, bolted down his blood
> And gorged on him in lumps, leaving the body
> Utterly lifeless, eaten up
> Hand and foot. (740-4)[14]
> That not blade on earth, no blacksmith's art
> Could ever damage their demon opponent.
> He had conjured the harm from the cutting edge
> Of every weapon. (801-4)[15]
> Every nail,
> Claw-scale and spur, every spike
> And welt on the hand of that heathen brute

[12] Đā se ellengaēst earfoðlīce / þrāge geþolode sē þe in þȳstrum bād

[13] Wæs se grimma gaēst Grendel hāten / maēre mearcstapa sē þe mōras hēold / fen ond fæsten· fīfelcynnes eard / wonsaēlī wer weardode hwīle / siþðan him scyppend forscrifen hæfde / in Caines cynne þone cwealm gewræc/ēce drihten þæs þe hē Ābel slōg· / ne gefeah hē þaēre faēhðe ac hē hine feor forwræc / metod for þȳ mane mancynne fram· / þanon untȳdras ealle onwōcon / eotenas ond ylfe ond orcnēäs / swylce gīgantas þā wið gode wunnon / lange þrāge·

[14] ac hē gefēng hraðe forman sīðe / slaēpendne rinc slāt unwearnum· / bāt bānlocan·blōd ēdrum dranc· / synsnaēdum swealh·sōna hæfde / unlyfigendes eal gefeormod / fēt ond folma·forð nēar ætstōp·

[15] þone synscaðan / aēnig ofer eorþan īrenna cyst / gūðbilla nān grētan nolde / ac hē sigewaēpnum forsworen hæfde / ecga gehwylcre.

Was like barbed steel. (983-6)[16]

These are some of the excerpts in which the first monster, Grendel, is described by the poet. The Old English words used to refer to Grendel: *ellengaést* "fierce creature", *gaést* "creature", *fífelcynne* "race of monsters", *wonsaélí wer* "unblessed creature" already present him as a different creature, unwanted in the human and sacred realms. Very soon the narrator lets us know why this creature who lives in the darkness is not allowed or even acknowledged among the Danish warriors: Grendel bursts into Heorot as a response to the envy he feels as he listens to the mirth of friends gathered at Heorot, and the sound of the music performed by the bard at the mead-hall (lines 86-7). This bard or *scop* is telling a song about the creation of the world, thus, possibly an account of the Genesis; by this analeptic reference, the poet links the present of the story to a more remote time, that of the monstrous origin of the creature who is listening to these song from a distance. Whereas the *scop* refers to the beauty of the just created world, he does not sing about the rise of monsters. Instead, this the narrator himself will explain some lines below, when introducing Grendel: envy seems to be the first feature characterizing the monster; he suffers when listening to the revelry at the hall; he is subsequently linked by the narrator to Cain (lines 102-14). It is here that we can appreciate the biblical sources early medieval Christian scholars shared. The narrator, talking from a Christian analeptic perspective, explains that Grendel lived among other monsters that descended from Cain after being banished by God for the murder of his brother Abel.

When dealing with this reference, critics have arrived to the conclusion that the poem is a palimpsest, this is, a manuscript in which the scriptures have been erased to write another text, in this case Grendel is said to be a descendant of Ham in a first instance rather than Cain, but as Ruth Waterhouse says (26) "The manuscript was altered from 'chames' to 'caines' ("because of Cain's kin"), as Ham (who was the second son of Noah) seemed less relevant than 'Cain' to a reader, given the following lines with their reference to the killing of Abel". Whereas this statement is also supported by Friedman, he adds that that "the poet was aware of an Irish source that substituted Ham for Cain as the progenitor of the races" (105), but as Margaret Goldsmith (102) states, "the killing of Abel is part of the story, and the spellings of the name therefore only indicate that at some time in its transmission the manuscript was copied by a man who believed the Ham version of the origin of monsters."

[16] feondes fingras·foran aēghwylc wæs / steda nægla gehwylc stȳle gelīcost / haēþenes handsporu hilderinces / egl unhēoru·

As already mentioned, the narrator placed the introduction to Grendel next to the reference of the song about the beginning of the world, when God "set the sun and moon to be earth's lamplight, lanterns for men" (l. 94-5) According to Jeffrey Cohen in "The Use of Monsters and the Middle Ages" (65-67), "the monster is being used as what could conveniently be called an illustrative antithesis, that is, as an embodiment of the textual suppositions' opposites". As he continues to say, Grendel attacks Heorot in a gust of jealousy of the *comitatus* as he, an embodiment of the individualistic anarchic enterprise, stands opposite to the well-ordered community, thus enhancing his status as an outcast of society, marginalized and monstered. Evidently, he is also considered a monster because he is physically different. He looks like a human being though of a gigantic size and strength. He differs also from what is considered to be normal in the fact that he does not wear clothes, he only has a glove were he puts his human preys; and he fights with his own hands, ignoring the art of battling; that is why Beowulf meets him without weapons, fighting and dismembering the monster bare-handed.

Just like the rest of Cain's descendants, Grendel refuses to be categorised as he is not clearly described: he is not accurately classified by the narrator, who links him to the evil progeny, *þanon untýdras*, along with elves, evil spirits and giants: *ylfe ond orcnéäs / swylce gígantas.* As we saw in Cohen's theses, monsters refuse to be categorized because of their nature, they are unsociable creatures and their body conditions make it difficult for scholars to define their nature. In the case of Grendel, we might wonder whether he is a hybrid creature (whose nature might include the animal, human and demonic essence) or just a giant because of his huge head and steel clawed hands.

Another characteristic that defines Grendel as a monster is his taste for human flesh. As Cohen says (1992, 61), "cannibalism is the ultimate violation of the divinely ordained host-guest relationship. The graphic depiction, down to catalogue of devoured bodily fragments, increases the deviance of the actions by creating an extended visualization of the scene". Thus, cannibalism here plays an important role as the monster's taste for human flesh drives him to eat one of Hrothgar's warriors and to drink his blood. This monstrous action violates human identity, in this case the warrior's one, because (according to Christian religion) our body is buried so that it may resurrect later on and in the meantime, the soul is released from the body; instead, if our body is eaten by a monster our identity is transferred to that of the monster. This cannibalistic tradition is not new; Chronus itself devoured his offspring to avoid his overthrow. Thus, Grendel could be related to the race of Anthropophagi that Pliny describes as "man-eaters". As Cohen explained with his theses, a way of monstering is paying

attention to cultural differences and it is in this case the way of alimentation that departs from the normal; this is why we find in Pliny's encyclopaedias a series of monsters that are catalogued as such not because of deformities but because of their tastes in feeding. Just as Grendel represents a different culture that bears body deformity and cannibalism he is also a vehicle of prohibition that warns society of those practices that are prohibited for them and that have to be erased. In some way Grendel is human since his motivation to attack Heorot is characteristic of human beings.

All these features make Grendel become a source of fear for the warriors and the king, a constant fear that for twelve years harasses Heorot thus reinforcing the theory of the monster's return explained by Cohen. This last theory is reinforced even after Grendel's death as his presence in Heorot is supplanted by his mother after his death. What Grendel represents then, is a self-other relationship in two ways; with society and with Beowulf. As Ruth Waterhouse explains (34), considering that the Danish society reflected in the poem is "semi-Christianized" we can say that Grendel represents as an *other* a pagan culture -Germanic- which attacks Heorot as an "anti-Christian representative" and attacks human beings' concept of the liberation of the soul by eating their bodies.

As for Beowulf, we can appreciate another self-other relationship since as Waterhouse (33-35) suggests they have related opposite features, and she is certainly right. In the poem we are told about Beowulf's and Grendel's strength, the first is as strong as thirty men and the other can carry thirty men in his glove. They are related to supernatural forces, the first is the chosen one by God, and the other is related and referred to as evil. And lastly, they look different from the others; the monster looks frightening while the hero stands out as a leader as well as in his capacities as a loyal retainer to his king and lord. Besides, when the rest of human beings prove unable to resist the monster, he maintains his eagerness and physical power, which enable him to fight Grendel without weapons and still defeat him.

Hitherto, we have seen what characterizes Grendel to be considered an element of otherness, opposed to society and all that is considered to be right. He is an entity that must be defeated to enhance the sense of community and rightness of human beings, and according to Cohen (1992, 68) his arm, and later his head are the symbols that represent this victory of the self over the other. After a first battle in which Beowulf had to fight with his bare hands a frightening, gigantic, immune to sharp-edged swords and strong monster, he will have to face the monster's mother.

4.2 Grendel's mother

> Grendel's mother,
> Monstrous hell-bride, brooded on her wrongs.
> She had been forced down into fearful waters,
> The cold depths, after Cain had killed
> His father's son, felled his own
> Brother with the sword. (1258-63)[17]
> Her onslaught was less
> Only by as much as an Amazon warrior's
> In less than an armored man's (1282-4)[18]
> The decorated blade came down ringing
> And singing on her head. But he soon found
> His battle-torch extinguished: the shinning blade
> Refused to bite. (1521-4)[19]
> So she pounced upon him and pulled out
> A broad, whetted knife: now she could avenge
> Her only child. (1545-7)[20]
> And the scrollwork on it burnt, so scalding was the blood
> Of the poisonous fiend who had perished there. (1616-1617)[21]

The second monster that Beowulf has to fight against is Grendel's mother. Unlike her son, she does not have a name and she is not physically described. What she has in common with her son is that she is said to be a water monster as a consequence of Cain having murdered his brother, the monstrous legacy according to the biblical account. After her son is dismembered and consequently dead, Grendel's mother comes to Heorot to avenge him. We do not know anything about her physical appearance except the fact that she looks like a female. As such, we evidently think about gender roles, a theme about which Alexandra Olsen (313) says:

> Traditionally, the study of gender roles in *Beowulf* has been based on the assumption that, since men were responsible for public functions like king, warrior and avenger, they also held the power in the world of the poem. Women, it was assumed, held more passive and private roles as hostesses, peaceweavers, and ritual mourners and were therefore marginalized by the poet.

These female roles can be seen in Wealhtheow, the queen, but not in Grendel's mother since she is playing an important masculine role, that of avenging her son. This is what characterizes her as a monster since, as Cohen explained in *Monster Theory*, one of the

[17] Grendles mōdor / ides āglaēcwīf yrmþe gemunde / sē þe wæteregesan wunian scolde / cealde strēamas siþðan camp him wearð / tō ecgbanan āngan brēþer / fæderenmaēge·
[18] Grendles mōdor·wæs se gryre laēssa / efne swā micle swā bið mægþa cræft / wīggryre wīfes bewaēpned men / þonne heoru bunden hamere geþuren
[19] þæt hire on hafelan hringmaēl āgōl / graēdig gūðlēoð·ðā se gist onfand / þæt se beadolēoma bītan nolde, / aldre sceþðan ac sēo ecg geswāc
[20] ofsæt þā þone selegyst ond hyre seax getēah / brād ond brūnecg·wolde hire bearn wrecan / āngan eaferan·
[21] sweord aēr gemealt· / forbarn brōdenmaēl·wæs þæt blōd tō þæs hāt, / ættren ellorgaēst sē þaēr inne swealt.

reasons of monstering an entity is related to gender. Thus the fact that she behaves as a man in her warrior function contributes to her being regarded as monstered by society. She could be related to one of the Plinian races since she knows how to battle. She, as we can see in the poem, is said to be a woman with warlike attitudes. She arouses less threat on the warriors since she is not expected but we later see that although she looks in some way harmless in comparison to Grendel's wild attacks she is "closer to success than her son" (Waterhouse 36).

Grendel's mother tries to kill Beowulf with a dagger and she is, consequently, killed with a magic sword. Unlike her son, Grendel's mother is skilled: she knows how to wield a dagger. Heaney's translation reflects the importance of this fact, since when referring to the she-monster for the first time (l. 1258-63) and linking her to the Cain's legend, he mentions a sword as the weapon used by Cain to kill his brother, a reference we find neither in Genesis nor in the Old English version. The hero will, thus, have to face a new stage in the development of the monstrous nature: that of the achievement of technical skills. In fact, this monster proves to be more advanced than her creature, since she handles knives and seems to be acquainted with the craft of forging and wielding weapons.

This unexpected skill to wield a dagger, together with the hard way to the aquatic cave- with the uncountable aquatic monsters trying to make a meal out of the hero- is what makes Beowulf struggle to survive having now to resort to a magic sword to kill her. None other kind of sword will do. Whereas he could slay Grendel single-handed, this mother requires the special support of magic to cut her head off, since the vulgar and human sword that Beowulf had was not enough to harm the creature. Her blood, in fact, proves so poisonous, that even the blade of the sword ends up melting away, only the handle remaining as a token of its former power and origin. We might relate his difficulty to defeat the second monster to the fact that vengeance is still regarded as a positive value in Germanic warrior societies: although the poem is presented from a Christian standpoint, the basic ideological tenets of the Germanic world demanded a code where vengeance was included. About Grendel's father nothing is said and although it is not explicitly included in the poem we might point out the possibility of incest, one of the features related to the monstering process of entities explained by Cohen, and a fact that we can observe in many cultures and myths. Grendel's mother is related as her son to the concept of *otherness* and has a self-other relationship with the women present in the poem. As Waterhouse (35) explains, human queens in the poem, Wealhtheow and Hildeburh, are associated with *selfness* in the sense that their sons died, and we can see how at the end of the first part of the poem Wealhtheow asks Beowulf to be her son's protector. Unlike Wealhtheow and Hildeburh Grendel's mother is associated to the *other*

because she "is able to achieve vengeance upon the impotent self of Hrothgar's court for the death of her son" (35-36). This human motivation was accepted in the Anglo-Saxon culture and after the conversion and if we take into account the fact that vengeance was considered as something positive rather than negative it is understandable that Grendel's mother killed Aechere to avenge her son and in the same way it is understandable that Beowulf killed Grendel's mother to avenge Aechere's death. Once again we can see human feelings attributed to monsters, the first one being jealousy, and the second one being the rage leading to vengeance. Of course, the last monster is motivated by another human feeling. Once Grendel's mother is killed we can discern what kind of monster the next opponent of our hero is likely to be (1616-7).

4.3 Dragon

> Until one began
> To dominate the dark, a dragon on the prowl
> From the steep vaults of a stone-roofed barrow
> Where he guarded a hoard (2211-4)[22]
> The burning one who hunts out barrows,
> The slick-skinned dragon, threatening the night sky
> With streamers of fire. People on the farms
> Are in dread of him. He is driven to hunt out
> Hoards under ground, to guard heathen gold
> Through age-long vigils, though to little avail. (2273-87)[23]
> He left the head alone, but his fighting hand
> Was burned when he came to his kinsman's aid.
> He lunged at the enemy lower down
> So that his decorated sword sank into its belly
> And the flames grew weaker (2697-701)[24]
> Then the wound
> Dealt by the ground-burner earlier began
> To scald and swell; Beowulf discovered
> Deadly poison suppurating inside him,
> Surges of nausea (2712-6)[25]

In the last part of the poem, Beowulf finds his last opponent, a dragon; but this is not the only dragon that appears in the poem. The first one is mentioned in a song of celebration

[22] oð ðæt ōn ongan / deorcum nihtum draca rīcsian / sē ðe on hēaum hofe hord beweotode / stānbeorh stēarcne·
[23] sē ðe byrnende biorgas sēceð / nacod nīðdraca·nihtes flēogeð / fȳre befangen·hyne foldbūend / : : : : : : : : : : : :nan.Hē gesēcean sceall / hearm on hrūsan þaēr hē haēðen gold / warað wintrum frōd·ne byð him wihte ðȳ sēl.
[24] ne hēdde hē þæs heafolan ac sīo hand gebarn / mōdiges mannes þaēr hē his mægenes healp / þæt he þone nīðgæst nioðor hwēne slōh, / secg on searwum þæt ðæt sweord gedēaf / fāh ond faēted þæt ðæt fȳr ongon / sweðrian syððan.
[25] Ðā sīo wund ongon / þē him se eorðdraca aēr geworhte / swelan ond swellan·hē þæt sōna onfand· / þæt him on brēostum bealonīð wēoll / attor on innan.

performed by a *scop* at Heorot in order to celebrate Grendel's defeat. There the poet talked about the dragon being slayed by Sigmund, which after being killed melted in its own heat. This new creature could not simply be another giant like Grendel or his mother; the poet wanted to make the last battle more difficult and epic by adding a dragon.

When we think of dragons we have in mind the typical western kind, with limbs, wings and spitting fire but, this dragon is rather described as a large serpent that flies -though no wings are mentioned- the kind of dragon found in eastern cultures. The *Beowulf* type spits fire, has no limbs and guards a hoard. According to Griffins (1996) Beowulf's dragon is related to the Greek and Roman kind of dragon; giant serpent, no limbs, no wings and "no particular affinity with fire". But as we can see in the poem, this dragon flies-or floats since he has no wings- and spits fire, and these facts make us think of the possibility of a dragon that emerged from the combination of different cultures. This blending of cultures is not new, the poem is full of Christian and pagan elements and it is not surprising to find this combination in the final and fatal battle. Large serpents, Griffins continues to say, can be found in the *Letter of Alexander* and in Pliny's *Natural History*. Apart from the wings, another feature of this dragon is the presence of venom; this, according to Griffins "might have led to a connection with heat." But the dragon in the poem uses fire (2273-87), not heat, and poisons the hero with its lethal bite (2712-6).

Griffins (10) says that in Germanic culture dragons were supposed to be guards of hoards. In the poem we find that this dragon is the guardian of a cursed hoard, a role to which he says:

> This dragon-guard seems violent only in a defensive role, and this is hard to square with its later use as an aggressive symbol ç8on war-banners etc.). The classical serpent-dragon, in some of its aspects, seems almost benevolent or useful; certainly quiescent, and the many gold-guarding dragons to be found in Germanic tradition suggest that this image also existed in their folklore or was transferred to Roman Lore, perhaps with the name itself, at an early stage, along with the potential for dragon-combat, quite separately from any actively aggressive or fiery or flying image.

In *Beowulf*, this monster maintains a positive role granted to dragons traditionally: it takes care of a hoard which the last survivor in an extinguished tribe had laid on a cave. In returning the treasure to the earth, the warrior intended all the knowledge and power of his dying tribe to rest protected forever by this creature. Therefore, the role of the dragon is a protective legitimate one: that of keeping the legacy of the dead. Nobody had dared to challenge this last wish of the ancient tribe and disrupt the security of the cave, and when someone does so, it is accidentally. Griffins (10) confirms this perspective as he links this dragon as a tomb guardian

to the Viking belief in *draugrs*, dead bodies that returned to life to guard the treasures that were buried with them. Griffins states that maybe this word was confused with *dragon*.

We can see in the poem that the dragon was resting in the tranquility of his cave till a slave found the creature's hoard and decided to take one of the pieces, a goblet, unaware of its origin. When the dragon realizes that its hoard has being altered, it goes furious and destroys everything it finds outside. Like Grendel and Grendel's mother, the dragon is motivated by human feelings; this time what motivates the creature to attack the community is greed. But his raids, as Griffins explains, have to be taken as defensive, since he is defending its hoard. One of the characteristics that the three monsters present in this poem share, along human feelings, is the fact that they only attack at night, something that can be related to their marginality in the human world and their punishment to dwell in the borders of the world. If we try to apply Cohen's theories to the dragon we can see the monster as an embodiment of monstrous qualities in different cultures; the blending of western and eastern characteristics is doubtless. As for the moral interpretation of the monster, maybe this dragon is being used as a warning to society in terms of vanity. The poet would be trying to make his society aware of the danger since the hoard brought no good either to the dragon or to Beowulf and thus to society.

Finally, Griffins suggests a relationship of this dragon to Satan. Although it is not made explicit in the poem, we can think of this relationship since Satan turned himself into a snake in the Garden of Eden. He also sees this relationship in the fire of the dragon, which can be related to the fires from Hell. But, as Tolkien (16) said "whatever may be his origins, in fact or invention, the dragon in legend is a potent creation of men's imagination, richer in significance than his barrow is in gold" and in the poem it is a powerful adversary for Beowulf, an element with which the poem brightly ends.

5 Conclusion

With the application of these early and late theories in the field of teratology I have proved the importance of the use of monsters in the poem as a way of enhancing the figure of the hero. As we have seen, the three monsters are not used lightly; instead we can see how they are more and more powerful with each battle. Although frightening, Beowulf found Grendel a weak opponent. He might stand as a representative of a basic and "natural" kind of monster, directly reflecting Cain's basic instinct to kill his equal out of jealousy. Consequently, his powers are merely physical and he wields no weapons.

When the poet neatly adds a second stronger monster, we see Beowulf struggle to survive, since Grendel's mother stands for higher principles than those her son represented: she attacks Heorot in revenge and in order to get her son's arm, which had been hung as a trophy. Thus, human cruelty was being punished, just as due compensation for the crime was being sought by the grieving mother. The only way the poem could have ended was by adding a monster that was meant to bring about the final deed of the hero. The dragon's essence was even more powerful than that of the preceding monsters, its superior weapons (fire and venom) being even more lethal. It is against it how our hero, old and tired is defeated in an attempt to defend his people. The monster, then, plays an important role not only as monstrous embodiment of important symbology, but also as the reason for the hero to improve and surpass his own human limits, having to face and accept death. As his physical powers diminish in front of the huge enemy who has the best of reasons to fight, the hero transcends the mere size of a champion to become the sacrificial victim who dies for the sake of his people. Thus, his moral size as he grows old and weaker still remains and is even reinforced.

This relationship between the hero and the monsters, the self-otherness relationship, is what makes this epic poem nowadays one of the most important ones and a key piece of literature in the Anglo-Saxon tradition. We could say that the poem itself is, in the good sense of the word, a monstrosity in English literature.

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